

In Remembrance

Vanessa Sequeira (1970-2006)

Vanessa, 36, a Portuguese national and citizen of the world, was violently murdered while undertaking field research in the state of Acre, Brazil.

She was a PhD student at the University of Wales/Bangor in partnership with the Tropical Agricultural Research and Higher Education Center (CATIE). Sven Wunder of CIFOR was one of her PhD advisers.

Vanessa was also part of the Poverty and Environment Network (PEN), conducting the first PEN study in Brazil to assess the local use of forest products in the region of Sena Madureira, Acre. Vanessa was one of the first PEN students to commit to the comparative project and therefore one of the PEN pioneers. This is a tribute from the “PEN-family”, to a wonderful person and a diligent researcher. To a woman passionate about her work in defending the forest and people’s livelihoods.



To Vanessa’s family:

On behalf of all of the staff at CIFOR I wish to express our sincere condolences to Vanessa’s family, friends and colleagues. The brutal loss of one of our peers has caused considerable anguish, shock, and sadness among PEN researchers, the CIFOR community, and among forest researchers and activists around the world. During her association with CIFOR Vanessa was highly regarded for her commitment to helping improve the lives of the poor.

I hope the following words from Vanessa’s friends and colleagues demonstrate the enormous admiration held for Vanessa as a sincere and wonderful woman who truly cared for the people and the world around her. May these tributes in some small way also help ease your pain and suffering.

We wish you peace and extend our sincere condolences for your loss.

Sincerely,

Frances Seymour
Director General
Center for International Forestry Research

Tributes from friends and colleagues

Arild Angelsen

PEN (Poverty and Environment Network) coordinator (05/09/2006)

arild.angelsen@umb.no

It is with great shock, sadness and anger that we today learned that Vanessa Sequeira was brutally murdered on Sunday. She was one of the first PhD students to join PEN and participated in the first PEN workshop in Bogor (Indonesia) two years ago.

CIFOR and PEN extend their sincere condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of Vanessa. This is a very sad day for the PEN family. We learned to know Vanessa as a hard working and sincere researcher, with a great affection for the people she was working with in the extractive reserve of Acre. I had regular contact with her on email and sometimes also on the phone. She was deeply committed to her work and the life of the people she was working with.

We will keep the good memories of Vanessa with us into the future, on a day filled with sadness and grievance.

Sven Wunder

CIFOR researcher, Belém, Brazil (06/09/2006)

s.wunder@cgiar.org

As Vanessa's PEN supervisor, I am just as shocked and shattered as Arild. Less than a month ago, I visited Vanessa in Rio Branco (Acre) for supervision of her work, and as late as the end of last week, we were in e-mail contact.

Vanessa was probably the PEN student I had most communication with -- lots of e-mails from her to try to interpret what she saw as an excessively complicated and cumbersome PEN questionnaire... Definitely all the economics stuff was not her cup of tea! She was also a person that felt most dedicated to action on the ground in favour of the people living in forested areas -- to the point that sometimes she came to doubt whether "PhD research" was actually the right choice for her. But by the end of the day, she tremendously enjoyed her field work, as is vividly witnessed by the fieldworking photo series she recently sent me. These photos will serve as one small way of remembering her as the engaged researcher and lovely human being she was.





Amy Duchelle,
PEN partner working in Bolivia and Brazil
(06/09/2006)
duchelle@ufl.edu

I am just back from the field only to receive this devastating news about Vanessa. We had a 3 hour phone conversation last week all about PEN and planned to spend this weekend together in Rio Branco to dance and drink and just have some fun, after what has been a trying few weeks of fieldwork for both of us. In our last conversation, Vanessa was dreaming of finishing her PhD and finding a mountain to meditate on. She had become very close to the community members with whom she worked in Riozinho. I would love to go there and tell those people how much they meant to her. Being with them was where Vanessa found her happiness in Acre. If you have any thoughts on how to move forward from this, please share. I am currently feeling my own mortality and vulnerability like never before.

.... (12 days later) This has been a devastating time for all of us, and I am really just starting to function again. I am now in Rio Branco, surrounded by a few good friends, who are also deeply feeling the loss of Vanessa. On Friday, we organized a small meditation in her honor at the yoga center that she considered a very special place. This coincided with other events occurring in Portugal and the United States. At the end of the month, we will go to Sena Madureira, Sort out her legal obligations, leave photographs for the communities where she worked and continue the process of having closure on Vanessa's life.

Brian Belcher,
CIFOR scientist and actively involved in the
PEN project (06/09/2006)
bbelcher@cgiar.org

It's really shocking – my mind keeps drifting back to this news and all that it implies. In the end there is little we can do but feel sad ourselves and offer condolences to her parents and loved ones who have lost so much. I think it will be at least some comfort to know that Vanessa was known, liked and respected by a large group of international colleagues.

Sebastian Scholz,
Germany, who attended the first PEN
workshop with Vanessa in Bogor,
Indonesia, in 2004 (06/09/2006)
sscholz@uni-bonn.de

I was shocked and deeply affected by your message. I just do not understand how a researcher like Vanessa, someone who is working and researching for the well-being of others, can become a victim of such a brutal crime. If you have the chance, please pass on my sincere condolences to the parents and family of Vanessa.

Julius Tieguhong,
PEN partner working in Cameroon
(06/09/2006)
j.tieguhong@cgiar.org

This is really sad, having met her during the first PEN meeting in 2004; she was such a nice person. We should give her a minute's silence wherever we are and may her soul rest in peace.

Syed Ajijur Rahman
PEN partner working in
Bangladesh (06/09/2006)
sumonsociology@yahoo.com

I am broken hearted as a PEN family member after hearing this news. I am shattered, I am shocked. Human life is uncertain, but it doesn't prepare us for this kind of trauma. Please keep her peaceful face, her soul deep inside your mind forever. As Tieguhong Julius said, could you please give her a minute's silence? Vanessa was working for the poor people. Vanessa may be dead but her spirits will stay with us forever. I have no more words...



Mutamba Manyewu
PEN partner working in Zambia (06/09/2006)
m.mutamba@cgjar.org

This is shocking news and it's difficult to accept that this actually happened to someone so close to us. Vanessa pushed herself to the limit in a very tough working environment because of her passion for the transformation of rural lives. It's so sad that her promising life ended in such horrendous circumstances. Many of us will remember her for her determination to make life worthwhile to a great majority of people with limited opportunities. May her soul rest in peace.

Patricia Uberhuaga Candia
PEN partner working in Bolivia (06/09/2006)
uberhuaga.pat@gmail.com

This is really shocking and painful news. This terrible event makes us realize how short life is and how vulnerable we are in our work. Peace to all her family and may her soul rest in peace.

Precious Zikhali
PEN partner working in Zimbabwe (07/09/2006)
Precious.Zikhali@economics.gu.se

I just want to express my sincere condolences to the PEN family, Vanessa's family, and her friends for the loss of a dedicated and kind person. I met Vanessa at the first PEN meeting in Bogor and I could feel the passion she had for her job and the desire to positively change the lives of those around her. I am shocked by her death and the circumstances surrounding it. May her soul rest in peace.

Bedru Babulo
PEN partner working in Ethiopia (07/09/2006)
benat95@yahoo.com

It is really shocking news that Vanessa has been murdered while working to contribute for the betterment of the poor. It brings sorrow and sadness for all of us, the PEN family, friends, and her family. May her soul rest in peace!

Christiane Ehringhaus
CIFOR scientist, Belém, Brazil (09/09/2006)
cehringhaus@cgjar.org

It is with both shock and great sadness that I received the terrible news about Vanessa's violent death. This has hit many of us really hard. I was especially shocked as I have worked in Acre for the last 10 years. In April I accompanied Vanessa to do her first field test of the PEN questionnaire in the very field site where she encountered her murderer a few months later.

It is hard to believe that such a thing could

to understand the state of Amazonia and the world. I saw her struggle with her research, always forcing herself and her work to be of the highest quality and the most relevant for the people of Acre. Ironically, it is the very passion, empathy, and commitment that Vanessa had for local people's livelihood struggles that presented a challenge for her "by the books" engagement with the PEN questionnaire. I am immensely saddened that such a marvelous person was abruptly taken away from this world in such a cruel and random act of violence. It is the incarnation of any researcher's worst nightmare and brings home a reminder of our own vulnerability.



happen in Acre, a place where so many of us have worked in great tranquility over the years. While Acre has experienced its share of violence (e.g. the assassination of Chico Mendes and other social movement workers in the 1980s by cattle ranchers) this has NEVER been targeted at researchers. Since the early 1990s many national and international researchers have worked in Acre, but none have been victims of this sort of crime. Many women, including myself, have been researching in the region for years and remained unharmed.

It has been a privilege to work with Vanessa. She was a marvelous person, full of life, with a passion and thirst for knowledge and a desire

Since very young, Vanessa embarked on her life's journey-- working in Northwestern Brazil, India, spending much time in Puerto Maldonado/Peru, Costa Rica, and finally Acre. Her life was rich in both experiences and adventures. She did this even though she was far from her family, under a tight budget, and enduring the great difficulties that arise when trying to maintain long-distance relationships with loved ones. Many of us know how difficult this can be, because we live with the same tensions. But I know one thing: Vanessa had a passion for "tropical" life, and had a very strong commitment to the rural producers in Amazonia, the conservation of the rainforest and making the quality of life better for its inhabitants - despite the personal sacrifice and the distance from her loved ones.



Dietmar Stoian
Ph.D. Advisor, CATIE, Turrialba, Costa Rica (02/09/2006)
stoian@catie.ac.cr

I extend my sincere condolences to Vanessa's family and friends all around the globe. The news about her murder is devastating and I feel shocked and speechless. At the same time I would like to honor her memory by sharing some of my personal impressions and experiences with her.

It was in January 2001 when I first met Vanessa on a workshop on community forest management in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia. Her reputation preceded her, as a colleague from GTZ had told me that I would meet a very dynamic and energetic person committed to the development of forest-based communities in the Amazon. This was by no means an exaggeration and Vanessa demonstrated her first-hand experiences, insight in Amazonian life, and dedication to local communities on more than one occasion. Since we were both working on Brazil nuts at that time, we continued to be in e-mail contact after the event.

In mid-2002 Vanessa wrote me again, this time regarding the possibility of doing a PhD. at CATIE. Her research interest centred on options to add value to tropical forests without compromising the natural resource base or, as she put it, "add value to the forest and ensure economic sustainability, but always respecting the 'ground zero' of environmental and social sustainability."

I assume that it was largely her field experiences in the Peruvian Amazon and elsewhere which broadened her view from a conservationist's perspective to a more inclusive appreciation of the different dimensions of sustainability. Her critical mind and profound interest in questioning even well-established notions and concepts made her a very interesting candidate for embarking on a PhD. program. In Vanessa's words, "as realistic conservationists we have to find solutions to the doubts that exist regarding the feasibility of sustainable forest management." A circle closed when after earning her M.Sc. in Environmental Forestry from the University of Wales in Bangor (UWB) in 1994-95, she was admitted to the joint doctoral program between CATIE and the UWB in 2003. On

the CATIE campus, she quickly became friends with a number of Master and PhD. students. In fact, there were few people who did not know her, as she was very sociable, open-minded and always interested in getting to know new people.

Vanessa had gone a long way from a conservation-oriented NGO activist to a people-centered researcher; although she was always more into practical conservation and development issues rather than dry theories or quantitative approaches. The very topic of her PhD. research, "Trade-offs between livelihood security and forest conservation in the Brazilian Amazon: the case of forest-based settlements in Acre," reflects this process. I guess the sense of being torn between these trade-offs was not only at the heart of her research but also part of her own sense of being torn apart between the at times conflicting goals of forest conservation and livelihood security.

When convinced of something, Vanessa's mind was hard to change. In the context of her research, "the economics stuff was not her cup of tea," as Sven Wunder put it. For this reason, she had no trouble in redefining a question on classical microeconomics during her preliminary exams into a question that better fitted her interests and preferences. With the



same liberty she made adjustments to the PEN questionnaire. When installing herself in Acre, Vanessa's openness, curiosity and charming nature helped her establish a solid network of institutional ties and friendship bonds. In her 'ark' in Rio Branco, which she had made into a comfortable place, she found refuge from the challenges of the field work and her Ph.D. research as a whole. From there we had lengthy telephone conversations about her methodological approach, the advances in her field work and the challenges encountered along the way. Just before leaving for the field, we had two longer conversations on August 30th and 31st. We discussed the remaining field work and decided to cut back her interviews from 100 to about 60, focusing on two settlement areas rather than three as originally envisioned. The idea was to finish her field work as early as possible and return to CATIE in February/March next year to finalize her thesis within the time frame established by UWB and CATIE. In our last conversation, Vanessa felt relaxed about what appeared to her a feasible program for the months to come and she was eager to go to the field to finalize the first phase of her field work in Sena Madureira. Before ending our conversation, she sent hugs and kisses to my wife and our baby, and I wished her good luck in the field and said "take care."

It is very hard to accept that Vanessa won't be back from the field, with all her energy and enthusiasm for bettering the lot of the people she was living and working with and doing research about. If 'unfair' ever had a meaning, it relates to the fate she met in the Amazon forest that, next to Sobrainho dos Gaios, had become a second home to her. We will keep her in respectful and loving memory. May her soul be at peace.

Two days in the field with Vanessa

Christiane Ehringhaus

In April 2006, Vanessa and I went on a 2-day field trip to the Projeto de Assentamento João Matos, in Sena Madureira, Acre, to test her questionnaire and assess how it integrated with her own questions.

After leaving Rio Branco in the early morning hours, we stopped in Sena Madureira, a sleepy little town. We chatted a few hours away, talking about research and the tricky questionnaire questions, while waiting for our hosts at the PA Jão Matos to finish their business.

The highway BR-374 from Rio Branco to Sena the landscape is almost one continuous pasture interrupted by the occasional (illegal) lumber yard. Finally, we left the highway and took a couple of “ramal” dirt roads until we reached PA João Matos and the neat, picket-fenced home of our host’s.

This area used to be extractive reserve until it was “invaded” by about 20 families, six years ago. A year later the area was declared a settlement project, a “projeto de assentamento.” During the five years since, many residents have deforested up to 80% of their land to establish cattle pastures, with the biggest clearings happening in 2005.

Vanessa and I were shocked that a piece of the extractive reserve had been sliced off and suffered deforestation so rapidly. It made us think about the important differences between the various types of land tenure models.

Our generous hosts were originally rubber tappers who lived in the city before retuning to the country side. They welcomed us warmly. We spent many hours talking with our hostess Dna Leide in the kitchen, our host Sr. Antonio, and his sons on the porch.





Lying in our hammocks, with a full moon and the quiet of the countryside outside the window, we talked late into the night. About work and our lives in Europe and Latin America. About the loves in our lives and our families. About being a researcher or an activist, the merits and demerits of economists, about life, colleagues, and friends in Acre. Good old gossip, and so much more.

Among the highlights for us was the 2-hour walk around the 50 hectare property, along a small ramal path, beside ponds and through the flooded forest, identifying plants, and trying out different fruit.

The walk took a toll on Vanessa's sandals, which were fixed first with a vine in the forest and later with a nail. You got to improvise, right? We joked about "inventing" a new non-timber forest product.

Finally it was time to say farewell to the hosts we'd come to care some much for. They were looking forward to Vanessa coming back and doing more research.

Between interview questions we'd chat and joke. Vanessa was a great sport in putting up with the jokes about the "Portuguese jokes," so popular in Brazil, and which Sr. Antonio had been saving for Vanessa's arrival. Vanessa and I aren't the best of joke tellers, we just laughed along.

The family took a shine to Vanessa and felt very comfortable in her easy and natural company. Vanessa herself felt at ease, helping them feel relaxed with us and our research. During this first trip the interview took incredibly long, which was cause for concern. At the same time, we learned an incredible lot about the region, the major livelihood issues, and the hopes and dreams of the family.





After such a peaceful time, and nothing more to worry about than some minor reservations about the questionnaire, we were in high spirits, happy to be on the highway to Rio Branco, heading home for a beer and a night out with friends.

Along the way, Vanessa took a picture of me standing and cheering in the middle of the road. Life was good.

We had no inkling of the dreadful danger waiting just a few miles and a few months ahead.



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